THREE D CROSSOVERS
(Ek Kheera Teen Phank)

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Feku got up and started sliding the coal-heap with his shovel. The coal-heap rumbled at once. Feku was filling a customer`s basket with coal & murmuring from his lips," Coal without permit. What, when the master (becomes angry), nothing but howls."

Surji, his wife, sitting at a short distance on a wooden stool, was receiving money from the customer. She said "Would the master not understand others` necessities and urgencies?

Feku was still lifting coal. That old shovel, red colour of its worn out handle` was all very familiar to him. The protracted large corns of his hands, often so well fitted in the handle grooves (which were) emaciated due to overuse.

Feku meant so many Fekus.Govt- night guard of the Sadar Police Station, shovel-man and honest servant of the coal depot-owner Hardeo Singh and husband of Surji, seated on the stool. Surji, her wel-built, blonde and longing figure, which attracted one's eyes, meaning Surji's figure, that is, figure of Feku`s wife.

Surji was wife of Feku. In total, Feku had one foot, one wife, two jobs and three sons.

Taking a bit rest, Feku looked at Surji. The day, when Feku brought Surji after gauna (ceremonial departure of a bride to her groom`s house), the neighbouring people complemented, "Never before such a beautiful bride had come to our Tola (locality)."

Feku recalled in his mind Surji's face of that day, blushing and tiered. After 5-6 months of his gauna he had been appointed as a watchman. He had received a blue kurta and a turban and a 10ft long spear at the Police Station. His lame foot had filled with some queer spirit, the first day he kept the spear on his shoulder.

That police sub-inspector was so merciful. Feku thought it as God`s grace & his future both were friends together. So, he got a government job so early! And his affection over-cast Surji. She too, was very fortunate. Her (good) fortune also assisted, in getting this job. And his heart filled with joy, for the baby expected after 5-6 months. He felt, as if, hey-days have opened all avenues for his progress and prosperity.

Feku watch kept the entire dark fortnight. After having evening meal, he left off, guarded the whole village, from midnight and before dawn, he slept at anybody`s out house. That year Ghutara was born. He liked very much Ghutara`s face as well as, Surji`s. He felt himself lazy, when he used to go night guarding after his evening meal. He wished, he could go nowhere, away from Surji .But he was bound to go. He was bound by the government. One day, he did not go to night-watch. Surji trembled with fear, (and said) " Being absent from duty,(it is)-all your responsibility."

And truly, the Sub-Inspector caught him at home. Feku thought that the officers are gods. They foresee the events to come, and from that day, he was never absent. After a year of this event, Mangla was born. When Feku conveyed this news to the S.I., an impressive smile had crept over his face. Feku felt deep sense of reverence for the S.I. (He was) very hard at taking duty but then very soft. He liked Feku. He liked him very much and that raised envy among the other chowkidars. Sometimes, the S.I. joked with Feku. He would ask him about Surji, and when on rounds, would visit Feku's house and ask his wel-being. Feku's joy would know no bond.

The S.I. had gifted a golden ape- god locket to Feku's second son. Overjoyed, Feku came & gave it to Surji and said "The S.I is an angel." After taking it in her hand, Surji kept it on the kothi (dried clay built small granary) with a brief glance and had not shown the same joy as by Feku. So, Feku did not feel nice of Surji.

Feku stopped shoveling. The basket had filled. So, he lifted & kept it over the weigh-bridge. He started filling coal in another basket .His master Hardeo Singh`s coal was used by the whole

town. The business was flourishing day by day. Feku's second son Mangala was very fortunate. After his birth, Feku got another job at the coal depot. He was very happy. From that day, he is working as a chowkidar at night and by day time, at coal depot, for the twelve months from dawn to dusk, he is a shovel-man at the depot, working with his shovel, the coal heap continuously, without break. All the day long, he operates with shovel. He works at night to safeguard people`s property, so that, none could steal others wealth and property.

Feku saw that Hardeo Singh had stopped his bicycle and got down. His coal lifting hands trembled. The hands of two cleaners, who were unloading coal, from a rail goods wagon, at a short distance from there, started doing briskly. The customer, who till now was peacefully smoking bidi and exhaling smoke, now became suddenly alert with a shudder. Surji stood up from her wooden stool. With the margin of her sari, she covered her half exposed breast and pulled the head covering sari, a bit forward around. A terror, fear & silence gripped all around. Only, the rumbling noise of rolling coal was heard.

Hardeo Singh gazed authoritatively all around. It seemed, his eyes' pressure was impressing everything, like a seal. He was satisfied to see everything at proper position. Then, after looking at the coal basket, he demanded its permit?

Feku trembled while standing. He looked at the customer with entreaty, who looked at him with an elegiac mood, after throwing his half burnt bidi on the ground. He felt, as if, he is trapped in a goddess` sacrificing altar. He spoke trembling "It…, it is without permit."

No sooner the half utterance came out of Feku`s mouth, than Hardeo Singh roared. The sound of the cleaners` coal sliding dissolved with his hoarse voice, like wooden fuel being axed. It seemed that the rambling sound of coal sliding rose up at once. Feku knew what fell next. So he stood silent bowing his head. He could do nothing more than this.

Dirty names were continuously coming out of Hardeo Singh`s mouth. His tongue was so accustomed to these abuses, that he took no time in making them out.

Everybody was listening, even Surji. She looked at her husband. She saw that he was taking in all this like a guilty man. Although, he was innocent. Surji did not like Hardeo Singh`s so vulgar abuses. She thought, she could violently bite his pimpled face, scratch it, snatch it, rub it off and bite it (again and again), but kept quiet for a while. Then, after taking stock of herself, she said "The customer has left his permit at home, so would he not get coal? I have asked him to deliver."

Hardeo Singh turned to Surji. His vomit of bad names stopped at once. He became quite calm, as if, nothing had happened. And a rough ocean calmed at once, or a hurricane had fallen down.

Feku gazed at his master, middle aged, clad in khadi dhoti-kurta. He looked at Surji`s round and fair face, blonde figure, healthy, exited, in a spotless white sari, like clad in a swan`s feather, exposed violet blouse matching the sari, her immense youth hidden in her blouse. Feku felt that if, Surji threw away the entire coal-depot, the master won`t utter even a single word. He would not beat his eyebrows even.

He started sliding coal. He might have been annoyed at Hardeo Singh`s abuses. It is not that it might not happen again. How much Hardeo Singh liked them! He gave new clothes to his entire family members, twice in a year, one at Jatra (Durgapuja) and the other at Phagua (Holi) shirt-pant to (each of) his three sons, sari, petticoat and blouse to his wife and to him, dhoti, gamchha (a thin cotton towel) and a round neck banian.

Standing at one place, Hardeo Singh inspected his large coal depot again. Besmirched with coal dust, Feku looked like a ghost, near the coal heap, or rather, (himself) like a big piece of coal and then he gave a fixed saturated gaze at the cash box, at last, at Surji (who was) sitting before it. She was a silver coin in his cash box. After looking at others, he again looked at Surji.

There was a small plain piece of land to the east of the coal depot, after which was Hardeo Singh`s residence. Hardeo Singh started rolling his cycle towards the same. In front of the residence, a wire was

fastened in between two fixed poles, on which were drying dhoti, sari, petticoat, kurta, blouse, brief and a towel. At first, was masters dhoti, kachchha, (underwear), next Surji`s petticoat-sari white broad-bordered, blouse and Hardeo Singh`s khadi-kurta. At another corner end, Feku`s dirty and filthy dhoti was hanging. Perhaps, he washed it with un-heated caustic soda. So, dirt & cleansing was zigzagged. It resembled fungus infection on Hardeo Singh`s broad back- skin.

Feku, at once, looked at his dhoti. The stain on it, reminded him of the ringworm (infection) in his waist. Feku did not like his dhoti being spread near his master`s. About sari, petticoat & blouse, he could not feel good. Nor he could fix dislike for it, whether it was near his dhoti, or near Hardeo Singh`s dhoti-kurta.

After the master proceeded towards his residence, Feku gave up lifting coal. He threw the shovel there. And now, he started lifting the customer`s female carrier`s coal, by arranging it in the basket (over to her head).

On his black due to coal, ghost like body sweat streamed down. Wiping out his sweat Feku came forward and stood near Surji. He gazed closely at Surji`s body once, but his eyes rested near the lock of strayed, hair on Surji`s forehead. A lock a beauty hair always hung there. Then again, he saw the fastened wire, on which was hung dhoti and sari and Hardeo Singh`s kurta.

Hardeo Singh had propped his bicycle by a wooden pole. He, at once, despised at the sight of the dirty dhoti on the wire, as if, all of a sudden the carcass of a dead mole was placed in his palm .He roared. "Who has kept this filthy cloth here? Throw it away."

He kept down the dhoti with a split bamboo lying nearby and went into his room after crossing the verandah.

Feku saw (all this) but spoke nothing, thought nothing. Looking at him, Surji said "Despite knowing well that the master dislikes, why did you hang it there?"

"I did not. The lad kept it there "Feku had not spoken the truth. The lad meant his eldest son Ghutara, who had not hung it there. He could not reach a wire so high. "Won`t he go to see Jatra at the king`s palace. He should go & have a bath. He could call the boys" said Surji. (In Mithila wives do not speak directly to their husbands or other elderly persons. So, they summon them indirectly) Where has Ghutara gone? He should buy a soap for four paisa. Whenever Feku had to dilly-dally, or hide something, he called for Ghutara. "Would he apply it over his body? Have my scented soap. Here it is. Surji spoke with request.

Oh no! I will take bath without it. Feku changed the topic. I bath without any soap by rubbing the body clean (with water). Feku started for the pond with gamchcha. At that time Surji was looking at him only.

When Hardeo Singh was not (present at the depot) Surji kept the accounts. Feku started for the pond with a gamchha. At that time only Surji was near him. As for his being a lame, she looked at his wave like going up-down (motion), black with coal dust filled body.

When Feku came back from the pond, he saw his three sons in new shirts and half-pants.

Yesterday, the master purchased these. Surji had brought these from the bazaar.

He looked at his three sons, turn by turn. His eyes stayed at Asharfia` s shirt-pant for a moment. It was more neat & shiny than that of Ghutara or Asharfia. Then he looked at Surji`s half violet blouse. Really, it looked decent to Surji.

Last night, while, showing him all those clothes, she said "The master himself selected this blouse-cloth. He likes this shade very much. "And he could like it more on Surji`s body."(thought Feku)

When Surji was showing all this to him, a small lamp light fell properly over her face. Feku felt, as if, her face was smiling sweetly. He wished that (emotional) fragrance to continue. He thought, he could drag her towards him. But he did nothing.

He had come out, pretending falsely to spit phlegm out. As if, everything of last night, has come live in his memory, he hurriedly started putting on his old dhoti.

"Why not he put on the new dhoti banian? Today is the Holy Goddess's Departure journey" Surji questioned.

"Why not?" said he. "It is Dak`s (Dak, Bhangari & Ghagh were ancient wise men) maxim which forbids putting on new cloth on a Tuesday, else death is eminent (to the wearer). So, how should I put these on!" "This does not apply on the Jatra (Dusserra) day."replied Surji. Master Hardeo Singh had (at that time) come back with this rolling bicycle. He took the accounts from Surji. When he was not there, Surji kept the transaction money. Whenever Surji was not at the depot, Feku kept the sales proceeds.

Hardeo Singh kept the notes is in his upper and the coins in his lower pocket (of kurta) The coins jingled collectively. At that time Hardeo Singh & Surji were standing face to face. His dhoti-kurta, like swan`s wings and Surji`s sari like the cotton buddy, inside with green shining of petticoat, tight blouse over her protruded body, inside which were two rounds of two fingers wide white stripes. Surji was looking very beautiful. So, despite cute to look at, Surji did not look beautiful to Feku.

Hardeo Singh`s exhaling air was falling on Surji`s face and breast. Her strayed lock of hair was wavering. Feku turned his face towards his three sons. Ghutara-dark complexioned, idiot like; Mangala- five years old and energetic, and Asharfia, fair, fatty and stern voiced. The golden ape talisman in a black dirty thread, the gift by the sub-inspector hung round his neck. Once again, he looked at Surji and started spreading his wet- dhoti- gamchha on some (wild) mirchaiya shrubs. After having taken the sales proceeds, Hardeo Singh turned back and saw the three boys.

"Hello kiddies! Would go to Jatra fair? He brought out two four anna coins from his pocket and gave one each to Ghutara and Mangala.He gave one eight anna coin to Asharfia and said "You are the youngest, so have the maximum" and then patted his cheek slightly. All the boys were pleased. Hardeo Singh smiled. Once again, he looked at Ashrfia, then at Surji, his coal heap and then, at his Green Raleigh bicycle. Maybe, smile could have come over Surji`s lips and fade out through the edge of her left eye. But it did not happen. Smile cheated her lips in its last moments of arrival (there).

Hardeo Singh kept his foot over the pedal and started on. After having spread his dhoti, Feku came slowly and saw money in the boys` hands. Without any surprise, he asked "Who gave them?"

"The master". Surji did not utter more than, a word. "Then, why not she takes these and keep (herself)? They might lose it somewhere." Very good. Speaking briefly, Surji took the money from the three and started tying it in the apron`s edge of her sari. The three boys became disappointed, but did not speak anything as they feared of Surji. Sometimes, Surji`s face would become so (grave) that all the boys became dumfounded. Surji`s face had become likewise today.

Come out I'll purchase some Jhilli -kachari (traditional snacks) for you. Feku had felt the boys` sadness. The three boys, at present liked their father more, than the mother. For a moment, their mind thought, father could have become mother. Evening was approaching. In the west, beyond the Railway Station, far beyond the mango orchards, the sun was eagerly rushing to set. The people from nearby villages were thronging to proceed ahead on, to the Jatra-tamasha at the king`s palace. Whole of the kings square might have filled with spectators (by now).

When Feku was about to move, Surji interrupted. "It would be late night, when he would be retuning from there. He would be tired in travelling such a distance. "Why not hire a rickshaw?" Feku liked Surji`s words very much. But when Surji started untying the apron edge of her sari in which were tied the four & eight annas given by Hardeo Singh, he did not feel well. He said "Leave it. We'll come back otherwise. The kings squere is not too far away." He, at once, gazed at his disabled foot and the three boys and left.

Surji started looking at her husband`s lame foot. She recalled her scented toilet soap, dhoti-banian, the four & eight annas, tied in her apron, given by her master. She saw her husband refusing these before her face. Feku did not accept. He took nothing. Surji felt, as if, nauseating. Her figure started sweating. Her arms and breast became tense. She wished Feku to comeback and churn violently and twist her entire body. She thought to tear into shreds and throw the blouse & petticoat, then run and put on her husband`s dirty and torn dhoti spread over the bushes. No matter, her body will remain half naked, her breast bare, let it be, but the treasure of her breast 'll remain intact.

Surji recalled in her mind, the mustached Sub-Inspector & cicatriced (scars of pimples) Hardeo Singh. She saw before her, Mangala with the ape talisman and fatty Asharfia. She thought to spit right in their faces and embrace Ghutara, to stand in close contact of her husband, so that, people would easily take them as a couple, both of them, Surji and Feku and in between them Ghutara-Feku, Ghutara-Surji, Surji –Ghutara-Feku.

Surji did nothing. She only intently gazed at Feku. Had Feku at this moment, given her even a brief look back, she could have everlasting joy. Her whole figure could have misted with Feku`s immortal gaze. But this could not happen. Feku did not look back. He was driving forward, the three boys. Surji`s sad gaze was following them from behind.

North to the Station, east to the railway track, was a snack kiosk. The rickshaw pullers were eating spiced- Bengal gram. The woman shop-owner was engaged in sales. The rickshaw pullers were looking at her daughter, who was engaged in deep frying snacks- kacharis, (which are prepared by deep frying wet grinded Bengal grams mixed with onion & other spices). Feku liked the shop owner`s daughter, her sweating face. He said "Modiain, please give something to eat. Crips kachari is being fried. Modiain said to her daughter after turing her face "Daughter, O Buchhi! Give Hazra (a respecting summon for a head of a labour family) crisp kacharis." (Modiain is a dignified summon to a trader`s wife & Buchhi an affectionate summon to a daughter. Tr.)

Modiain liked Feku, the chowkidar. In the dark nights, Feku would come to her and give three (alert) calls there. Buchia came to serve him kacharis. Feku stretched his hand to have them. But felt as if, he has extended his palms to have her hands. He liked her hands very much. He wished, he could have touched her hand and he had even touched them slightly. But just then, Surji`s face came before his eyes for a moment, as like during night (duties) his mind was influenced after hearing Buchia`s coughing at Modiains place and instantly Surji would come to his mind. Feku was at a loss (to judge), wheather Buchia`s or that of Surji`s was better? He gave one kachari each, to the three boys & took one in his own mouth.

"Modiain, give me jhilli for six paise" Feku, said. (Jhilli-a cob web like salty preparation made by a dough of water mixed gram flour with other spices & salt .He took Jhillis from Buchia. Then he saw Mangala, his golden ape-talisman, Asharfia his fatty body, his neat shirt pant. Feku paused for a moment. He was thinking something unknown. He handed one Jhilli to Asharfia, one to Mangala and four to Ghutara, who was standing by his side. Mangala became angry but kept mum. Asharfia razed with anger said "I won`t take it" and started throwing his hands and legs desperately. Pacifying him Feku said "The youngest one gets the minimum. Eat this first". Asharfia did not keep calm. He became more uneasy. Feku became very angry. In the meantime, Mangala also rebelled. Clenching his teeth Feku spoke," "Sarh (wife`s brother)! Have these, or else, I would throw you down by holding your neck." For a fraction of time, Surji`s figure came before his eyes. That when, he came back after night-watching, sometimes, he noticed Surji`s exhausted body, her disheveled hair, her burning eyes, piteous, anxious and helpless eyes, her aching body and (mute) depressed mind.

Feku could not think further. He bought six more Jhillis and gave two each to the three boys. Now, Asharfia and Mangala had three each and Ghutara had six. Feku was unable to distribute Jhillis equally among them. He had developed a practice of giving more to Ghutara, but it was impossible for him, to give nothing to Mangala & Asharfia. The Sub-Inspector and Hardeo Singh started hovering in

his mind and before him was Buchia. But, he could not place her in Surji`s seat. There remained only Surji there.

(All underlined words to be read as italicized Tr.)